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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - February 1, 2008

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

12. Expelled Activist Drafted into Military

Gomel-based Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) youth activist Dmitriy Zheleznichenko January 25 began a hunger strike to protest his January 22 expulsion from university and immediate conscription into military service. Army officials informed the media January 30 that the activist suspended his hunger strike and has been transported to a military unit in Zhlobin. The BPF denounced Zheleznichenko's draft as "illegal" and appealed to local courts and the Defense Minister. Zheleznichenko is also facing fraud charges following his three-hour detention January 24 on suspicion of theft. The victim of the theft claimed to recognize the activist as the thief, and on this basis the police opened a case against Zheleznichenko.

13. New Life Church Receives Warning

A Minsk district prosecutor's office January 30 warned Vyacheslav Goncharenko, the Pastor of the Protestant New Life Church (NLC), about his refusal to allow officials access to NLC facilities. The NLC dismissed the warning and says it will continue to not allow any GOB official inside the church until the Supreme Economic Court settles its ongoing dispute with the Minsk authorities involving

building and land plot confiscation.

14. Activists Jailed for Unsanctioned Rally

A Soligorsk district court January 29 sentenced activist Larisa Nasanovich and small business leader Aleksandr Tsetsuro to 15 days in jail on charges of leading an unsanctioned rally. The police arrested Tsetsuro and Nasanovich the same day in central Soligorsk where they led a protest and collected signatures challenging social benefits cuts and recent changes to laws governing small businesses.

15. New Generation Protestants Fined

A Baranovichy district court January 30 fined the local New Generation Protestant community BYR 700,000 (USD 330) for illegal worship. Authorities maintained the church violated its lease by conducting illegal religious services there. Lawyers for the group called the verdict "far-fetched," asserting that the charges came only as a result of local political pressure on the presiding judge.

16. Belarusian Christian Democracy Denied Registration

The Supreme Court January 30 upheld the Justice Ministry's (MOJ) registration denial of the NGO Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD). BCD Co-chairman Aleksey Shein said that the verdict was "predictable" and "politically motivated" since other NGOs with the same charters had been registered. The MOJ cited the BCD charter's inconsistency with legislation as a reason for denial. Shein noted plans to re-apply and to begin preparations for a founding convention for the party.

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International Trade

17. Ministry of Economy Sets Export Priorities

Belarus' Ministry of Economy January 22 approved its export development plan for 2008, highlighting China, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa and the European Union as main priorities. Exports to China will include 65 BelAZ dump trucks, 300 Belarus tractors, 1,000 tons of flax fiber and at least 1 million tons of potash fertilizers. The state-run Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT) plans to complete deliveries under a contract with the UAE during 2008 and to create a joint venture in the UAE to provide maintenance and partial assembly of equipment. The government ordered producers of trucks and tractors, bearings, machine-tools, optics and artificial fibers to increase exports to Syria. Plans also call for the Belarusian Petroleum Company to open an office in the UK this year. Companies subordinate to the State Military Industrial Committee are directed to enter the Indonesian, Malaysian, Thai and Philippine markets. In addition, the Ministry of Trade, the State Property Committee and the Foreign Ministry are expected to elaborate detailed projects establishing Belarusian trade and logistics centers in Russian regions, as well as in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

18. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan Sign Customs Agreement

The Belarusian press reported that the Prime Ministers of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed an agreement in Moscow January 25 to establish a regulatory framework for a customs union. The three other members of the European-Asian Economic Community (EurAsEC), Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have postponed a decision regarding the union. Belarusian Prime Minister Sergey Sidorskiy stated that he hopes to have the union's energy and transport strategies approved by the next session of the EurAsEC Interstate Council.

19. Belarus to Build Gas Supply Network in Venezuela

The Venezuelan Embassy in Minsk January 30 announced plans for a new Belarusian venture in Venezuela. The plan calls for the Belarusian state-owned fuel supply company Belpalivagaz to create a gas supply network in the Venezuelan province of Barinas. Representatives of the company will sign a contract in Venezuela in mid-February.

¶10. Quote of the Week

Petr Prokopovich, head of the Belarusian National Bank, apparently believing his own government's propaganda about the bright economic future of Belarus:

"Between 2010 and 2015, we will solve a series of fundamental problems. In particular, the average Belarusian salary in 2015 will be no less than EUR 1,000. This assignment has been sent down from our head of state."

Stewart